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SUBJECT: HONDURAN FOOD SAFETY LABS IN DISARRAY

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. A recent USDA lab assessment mission determined that Honduras, food safety organization (Senasa) does not have labs sufficiently supplied or staffed to do even the most basic food safety testing. The assessment team visited animal health, plant health and pesticide detection labs. Of those labs, the only one that the team found capable of performing reliable tests is the pesticides lab which receives direct funding from OIRSA. Senasa suffers from lack of sufficient funding and lack of trained personnel. The assessment team told Econoff that they cannot recommend that USDA accept Senasa sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) testing certificates as sufficient proof of food safety. This endangers Honduran public health, and will seriously hinder Honduras, ability to take advantage of new opportunities to export agricultural products to the U.S. under CAFTA. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The USDA lab assessment team conducted a comprehensive analysis of the capabilities of Senasa,s animal health, plant health, and pesticide detection labs. They concluded that lab conditions are so poor that it would be difficult for USDA to approve any products going to the U.S. solely with Senasa testing. Significant USG oversight at every step would be necessary. The general problems the team found include lack of funding and lack of adequately trained personnel. Funding directly impacts the ability of the labs to reliably complete the most rudimentary tests. The assessment team found that the labs lack even the most basic materials such as paper towels and pipettes.

¶3. (U) The GoH has contracted regional laboratory advisor Oirsa to manage certain administrative aspects of Senasa, most importantly collection and dispersal of funds to the laboratories. Money should be flowing back to the labs from the fees Oirsa and Senasa collect) and Oirsa manages - for laboratory services rendered to producers and processors of food products. However, funds only appear to be reaching the pesticide lab - which is the only lab that Oirsa directly administers - and not the animal or plant health labs. Senasa Director Cesar Noe Pino commented that the GoH would have to modify certain laws to be able to have the money returned directly to all of Senasa,s labs. (Note. Post believes Noe Pino is referring to laws that require fees charged for government services flow into government coffers. Certain agencies, such as the mining authority, have special permissions to retain fees for services, but these permissions have been written directly into the laws which established these agencies. End note.)

¶4. (U) Technicians generally are not college-educated and often use outdated (up to 30 years-old) techniques, protocols

and reagents. Other problems included lack of physical space to isolate and separately ventilate/air condition different tests and/or stages of tests in certain labs. The animal health laboratory was by far in the worst condition. The team said that not only are the laboratory facilities and protocols inadequate, so are the field investigations the lab conducts at the farms and processing plants. (Comment: This is particularly worrisome in the face of growing international concern over avian influenza, as it is far from clear Honduras has the capability to detect, much less counter, this lethal disease. End Comment.) The plant health laboratory does not have the capability to do diagnostic testing, rather only basic nimatodal testing.

¶15. (U) The pesticide lab is the one laboratory that approaches U.S. standards and conducts credible tests, for the most part. It has modern equipment) including a LC mass spectrometer - and sufficient space to do all types of pesticides testing. However, the team expressed concern that the lab employees do not fully understand how to use the equipment or how to maintain it. In fact, the team member who led the assessment of this lab had to install the LC mass spectrometer and a calorimetric pump for the lab because there was not sufficient local technical expertise to do so. (The million-dollar machine, provided by the World Bank, had reportedly been sitting in a box for months at the lab before the visiting USG team fortuitously offered to install it for them.) The team recommended that Senasa hire a PhD level chemist to run the lab.

¶16. (SBU) Cesar Noe Pino seemed very open and listened attentively to the assessment team,s critiques and suggestions. Nevertheless, he did not appear to initially comprehend that there are two key problems. Noe Pino focuses mainly on the need to improve training for lab techs. The assessment team had to reiterate several times that training will not solve Senasa,s problems because training does no good if there are no materials in the labs with which to work.

¶17. (C) Comment. The lab assessment team,s report will be another blot on the report card of the Zelaya Administration. Although professing dedication to free trade, Zelaya,s government does not take the necessary steps to ensure that the Honduran government and private sector are prepared to take advantage of CAFTA. If Senasa is unable to conduct effective food safety tests, USDA will have to approve all products for export via individual product agreements and inspections, significantly slowing the exportation process. The sorry state of Senasa,s labs is just one more example of this general trend of un-preparedness.

¶18. (C) Comment continued: It is also indicative of a preference of depriving essential government services of funding in the hope that international donors will pick up the bill. Meanwhile, the Zelaya Administration pursues pet projects, such as basic grains subsidies, that not only are unproductive but run counter to USG and other donor programs of market-based agricultural diversification. End comment.

¶19. (U) The USDA lab assessment team did not have the opportunity to clear this cable before departing.
FORD